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18



34



22

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IN PROCESS

God created a world that is in the process of becoming. It isn't done yet—and neither are we. The world can be a risky place, but we live and we learn, and so we grow.

- 8 Alligator Fears** Many of our deepest fears are sort of alligator fears—gliding fast and hungry toward us or biding their time, just under the surface. *Martha Sterne*
- 12 From Font to Funeral** At All Saints Day we often remember those saints who have died during the past year. When we think about their funerals, let's remember their baptisms. *Dennis L. Bushkofsky*
- 18 Eating Alone** *Alone and lonely* are not synonymous. Happiness is an inside job. *Sonia Solomonson*
- 22 Picture Perfect** We're in the process of becoming. We're not perfect, and for some of us, perfectionism can be a catalyst for sin. *Serena S. Sellers*
- 32 A Focusing Event** The crises of life can make us suddenly focus on what is truly important: friends who stand with us in our hour of need and God's word that stands forever. *Wendy Reid Crisp*
- 34 Bold Lessons from India** The 300th anniversary of the Lutheran church in India was celebrated in July. What can we learn from our brothers and sisters across the globe? *Terri Lackey*

DEPARTMENTS

- 4 Voices** **In Process** *Kate Sprutta Elliott*
- 5 Give Us This Day** **The Patience of God's Time** *Marj Leegard*
- 6 Calendar Notes** **November** *Audrey Novak Riley*
- 16 Let Us Pray** **The Examen** *Debra K. Farrington*
- 21 We Recommend . . .** Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study.
- 26 Bible Study** **Session 3: Suffering as Becoming** Chance and randomness are also part of God's world, a world that is still in the process of becoming. *Terry and Faith Fretheim*
Hope in God in Times of Suffering
- 38 Health Wise** **Overcoming Alzheimer's** *Molly M. Ginty*
- 40 Grace Notes** **Open Circles** *Linda Post Bushkofsky*
- 42 Amen!** **Trusting Grace and Vision** *Catherine Malotky*

PLUS . . .

- 17 Women of the ELCA Grants** **Raising Up Health** *Audrey Novak Riley*
- 41 Directory of Reader Services** Subscription, editorial, and ordering information.

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VOICES

Do you know the saying,

"Be patient—God isn't finished with me yet"? That's what this issue is about. God isn't done with me or you—or creation, for that matter. We're all in the process of becoming. It's not always fun being a work in progress. Sometimes life feels risky and scary and overwhelming.

When it comes to risky and scary, writer Martha Sterne knows something about that. In "Alligator Fears," she tells the story of a happy family event that was disrupted by an unexpected visitor. She writes, "Most of our deepest fears are sort of alligator fears. The alligators we see—with horrifying clarity—gliding fast and hungry toward us or toward somebody we love. And the alligators we don't see—the ones holding their breath, biding their time, just under the surface—waiting in the dark and the muddy places."

Sometimes when we're faced with the messiness of life, we struggle to make everything neat and tidy. In "Picture Perfect," Serena Sellers reminds us that perfectionism has a dark side: "I was so busy trying to be perfect, I didn't have time to be human. I was in denial about the limits of my time and energy, but that didn't make my limits go away."

Our limits don't go away. We begin this month with All Saints Day. During worship that day many congregations remember those who have died in the past year. While we celebrate the lives of the saints and perhaps grieve their loss, we also remember our own mortality. In "From Font to Funeral," Dennis Bush-

kofsky tells us that from the day of our baptism, our home is with God.

Later this month we set aside a day to remember our blessings and express our gratitude. For many of us, Thanksgiving weekend is a time for celebration and gathering with the people we love. But for some of us, the holidays can be lonely and difficult. Sonia Solomonson writes in "Eating Alone" about the difference between *alone* and *lonely*. She asks, "Perhaps living alone wasn't your choice. You still have choices: Will you make it a rich, healthy, and good experience?"

As we think about the blessings in our lives, also remember those in our world who struggle and suffer, lacking even the simplest resources. Terri Lackey, managing editor of *LWT*, went to India this past July with an ELCA delegation celebrating the 300th anniversary of Lutheran mission in India. She writes from her guest room in a Hyderabad orphanage, "I can look out my window here and see families living under blue tarps. I can see them bathe in the open air using a bucket and a water pump. She says that, "Despite the poverty, the people . . . offer visitors hospitality unequaled in America. In India there are people who will give you all they have—mostly genuine smiles."

In this season of remembering and gratitude, let's keep a place in our hearts and our prayers for those who are in any kind of need or trouble, that they may be delivered from their distress. 🌿

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.

In Process

by Kate Sprutta Elliott



GIVE US THIS DAY

The Patience of God's Time

by Marj Leegard

This is the season when we moan and groan. Pastors at the door and worship committee members in the aisles are on the receiving end of the complaints: "Why can't we sing Christmas music?"

"Hark, the herald angels" goes cascading down Main Street right on the tail feathers of the Thanksgiving turkey. The malls ring with jingle bells and we want to join the glad chorus on Sunday mornings, too!

Some of us may gripe about the stores putting up red, green, and gold when we are still in the orange, brown, and maple leaves mode at home, but those who are handy with hook and needle are grateful for the hastening of Christmas in the stores. It reminds us that pot holders and quilted wall hangings are not made in a day. This year we mean to start early.

We are not in the mood for "Prepare the royal highway. The King of kings is near!" And we don't want to "Wake, awake for night is flying" either.

The church's liturgical calendar guides us through the year, giving us texts and hymns to illustrate our faith. Its seasons guide not only our congregation but the whole church. They will guide us again next year. We celebrate the seasons with colors. After the white of Easter season comes the amazing red of Pentecost.

Our congregation's tradition means that ancient red altar cloth, the very first one to cover our altar. It could have been replaced many times, but the worn red

with its sparkling white linen overlay just suits us. Then when we least expect change, there is green for growth.

The patience of God's time is invited into our hearts and the patient time is now, Advent, the season of haunting blue violet. We long for the news of the manger child and that longing is expressed in minor keys and Old Testament prophecies.

As worshiping congregations we notice the seasons by the changing colors in the sanctuary. The changing color in our souls also calls us to grow in the church year. Perhaps we pay too little attention. Some among us might not know what these signs are trying to say. Remember when the church treasurer gave temple talks? The altar guild could give temple talks now. Tell us about the color when it changes. Tell us why we sing of longing while the world sings of a non-existent sleigh and its bells. We are involved in great drama in our worship. God is speaking in text and sermon and the hymns we sing. God is speaking through the warmth of greeting in the pews. God speaks through the very act of our gathering together.

Our little granddaughter-by-friendship happily sings "Silent Night" in May for her chosen grandfather because for the two of them it is not a season, but a statement of faith. We can sing Christmas music all year long if that is our choice but make room for Advent!

The joy will come at Christmas. 🌿
Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.



CALENDAR NOTES

November

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley
from sources including *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, *Sundays and Seasons*, and *Lutheran Book of Worship*, published by Augsburg Fortress, Publishers
(www.augsburgfortress.org)

As the end of the liturgical year draws near, the Sunday readings show us visions and glimpses of the reign of God, when God's beloved creation will at last be brought to fulfillment in the love and grace of Jesus Christ our King.

1 All Saints Day

The custom of commemorating all the saints of the church on one day goes back to at least the third century. Today or on All Saints Sunday, many congregations will particularly remember people of the community who now sing with all the saints in glory.

Our liturgy and tradition abound with reminders of the saints and our continual relationship with them, as models and inspiration for our own lives of faith. Who among the saints, known to the world or known to you alone, has inspired your own walk with God?

5 Sunday 31, Time after Pentecost

Your congregation may choose to proclaim the texts appointed for All Saints Day or those appointed for the 31st Sunday after Pentecost today.

In the first reading for Sunday, Deuteronomy 6:1–9, Moses tells the people that the LORD is one God and that we are to love the LORD with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our might. This text is part of the ancient Jewish prayer called the *Shema*, which observant Jews have recited every morning and every night for thousands of years. Jesus and his disciples and neighbors would have followed that practice.

In the Gospel, Jesus says that this is the first commandment and the second is to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we live these commandments, Jesus says, we are not far from the kingdom of God (Mark 12:34).

7 Election Day

Should Lutheran Christians take an active part in the political realm? Martin Luther emphatically said yes. A resource from Women of the ELCA, *Called to be Political (But I Don't Want to be Political!)*, discusses Luther's view that we are called to be partners with God in bringing about the reign of justice. One tool we can use in that project is our vote. Download the resource from www.womenoftheelca.org/resources. Click on the link "theme-related" on the left side of the page and scroll down to find it.

11 Veterans Day

At 11:00 a.m. Paris time on November 11, 1918, the guns fell silent in Europe and the First World War came to an end. People hoped it was the war to end wars. For many years, this date was observed as Armistice Day; now it is observed as Veterans Day, honoring veterans who have served in all branches of the military, in times of war and in peace.

11 Martin, bishop of Tours

One cold winter day in about 334, a beggar at the gates of the city of Amiens pleaded for help from a Roman cavalry officer. Martin drew his sword, cut his thick cloak in half, and gave part to

the beggar. That night, he dreamed of Christ wearing the cloak.

After being baptized, he asked for release from the service, saying, "Hitherto I have faithfully served Caesar. Let me now serve Christ." In 371, the people of Tours acclaimed this tireless fighter for justice as bishop. He died on November 8 and was buried in Tours on this date in 397.

22 Sunday 32, Time after Pentecost

In both today's first reading (1 Kings 17:8-16) and Gospel (Mark 12:38-44), the humble widows give of their substance, generously trusting in God who cares for the poor. How is their generosity even in their own poverty a reflection of the reign of God?

17 Elizabeth of Hungary, renewer of society

This princess spent her wealth on the poor and the sick, much to the irritation of the luxurious royal court. Undeterred by their scorn, she persisted in her works of charity. After the death of her husband, she gave her inheritance to the poor. She founded two hospitals in her short life, and many more are named after her yet today. She died in 1231 at age 24.

19 Sunday 33, Time after Pentecost

Daniel's vision (12:1-3) tells us that those whose names are written in the book of truth will be delivered, and that the wise and those who lead others to righteousness will shine like the stars. And Jesus calms our fears (Mark 13:1-8): God will bring the beloved creation to fulfillment,

not destruction. In the meantime, he tells us, let no one lead us astray.

23 Thanksgiving Day (U.S.A.)

Today we gather together to give God thanks for all our blessings.

You might sing "Now Thank We All Our God" (*ELW* 839/840; *LBW* 533/534) at church or at table today. The text of that hymn comes from a table blessing written by Martin Rinkhart in 1644. He was pastor of Eilenberg during the Thirty Years' War, which devastated central Europe. The fortified city was filled with refugees; the crowded conditions naturally led to hunger and disease. In one year, Pastor Rinkhart buried more than 4,000 of his parishioners. And yet he was able to write this hymn filled with joyful thanks and praise.

The Gospel reading appointed for today is Matthew 6:25-33, where Jesus tells us not to worry about what we will eat or drink or wear. What does that mean to us, as we prepare our Thanksgiving feasts? See page 22 for more.

26 Christ the King

The last Sunday of every church year is dedicated to Christ the King. The Gospel reading appointed for the feast in this Year B is shocking: Pilate questioning his prisoner Jesus (John 18:33-37). Jesus mystifies the Roman governor by telling him what kind of king he is: the kind whose mission is to testify to the truth. And cynical Pilate snorts: "Truth! What is truth?" Those who know Jesus know the answer to that question. 🌿

We are not ever going to understand
and control evil, suffering, and chaos.

{ Alligator Fears }

by Martha Sterne



God to Job about a leviathan or an alligator or something like that: *Who can stand before it? Who can confront it and be safe?* (Job 41:10b-11)

And Jesus to the sea in the storm: *Peace! Be still!* (Mark 4:39)

My parents were married in the living room of my grandparents' home in Alexandria, Louisiana, on the afternoon of June 19, 1941. War was coming but Pearl Harbor hadn't happened yet, and the timeless joy of a wedding day perfumed the air.

Of one thing we may be sure. It was hot. There were beautiful flowers from the yards of friends and neighbors, and my mother floated down the stairway on the arm of her father into the marriage that she had hoped for, even schemed about for a number of years. She told her grandchildren recently that she had potted my father on his bicycle when he was 14 and she was 12, and she thought to herself, hmmm.

As far as his initial response to Mother, he was sort of oblivious at the time. The day she saw him sailing down the sidewalk with his blond hair flying and a lopsided grin on his face was the year before his father dropped dead of a heart attack and two years before his mother died of kidney disease.

Maybe it was hard to entertain romantic possibilities when your

family had imploded. After his parents died, his older sisters took on parental responsibilities, and families in Alexandria and later in the small town of Sewanee, Tennessee (where he went to college), took him into their hearts.

I'm not sure how

Mother overcame his inertia.

She doesn't know either. All she remembers is that at the beginning of a very short train trip from New Orleans to Baton Rouge for a Tulane-LSU football game, he mumbled something to the effect that they were definitely Not Getting Married. And at the end of the train trip, he mumbled something like, "We'll figure something out." Mother figured out that the "something" was they were Definitely Getting Married.

Although my father died 10 years ago, their wedding anniversary is, of course, still their wedding anniversary. Mother said she felt sort of sorry for herself this last go-around, but she has always been practical and inventive. So she invited a widowed friend over and said, "Now today is my wedding anniversary. So you tell me about your wedding, and I'll tell you about mine."

My parents' biggest anniversary bash was their golden wedding anniversary, back in 1991. They invited everybody still alive from their wedding era, as well as rela-

tives like us who were born later. So most all of their relatives and their oldest friends gathered out in the country outside Natchez, Mississippi, at a beautiful place where Mother's family has been living and reunioneing for almost 200 years.

Much of the land is deep, dark woods full of songbirds and wild turkey and deer. Spanish moss drips from giant live oak trees, and a great blue heron sails among the ponds. You have to chase the cows out of the yard every once in a while, which gives the children and dogs something to look forward to. And you definitely need a can or two of bug spray, but that's about it. It really is a peaceful sort of place, a kind of dark and green paradise.

It was just right for the occasion. After all, a 50th wedding anniversary is almost by definition a calm and gentle celebration of weathering the storms, of keeping the faith through the better and the worse, and the richer and the poorer, and the sickness and the health. It's a homecoming time when people sit and maybe rock and smile and remember. So mostly that house party was "safe harbor" time. Except for one thing.

This alligator showed up.

We had never ever had an alligator on that place. And here was this thing—eight feet long if it was an inch—steaming up and down the



***"Did he crawl across
the pasture over to the
graveyard pond where the
big children like to grab
the rope swing and jump
way out into the middle?"***



pond closest to the house. Sometimes just his eyes showed. And sometimes he floated way up high so you could see from the tip of his snout to the end of his tail. He was huge.

Of course, immediately, alligator experts emerged among the crowd of friends and relations. Some surmised how he got there. Others told us how long he could stay under water and how fast he could move on land, the consensus being that he could outrun a beagle. Let me tell you how much the mothers of small children loved hearing *that*.

Some told us how much we could get for him per pound. One heard about the financial possibilities and climbed a tree and tried to lasso him. And then there was the expert who told us how to make him paddle over to you—not what I wanted to do for the afternoon's entertainment. But just in case there is somebody reading this who *wants* to know how to call an alligator, here's what you do: You hit the water with a stick and bark like a dog.

All in all, our visitor kind of added to the festivity, and the Game and Fish warden said he'd come in a couple of days to trap the alligator and take him to a new home. We visited with each other and ate a lot and drank a little, and whenever there was a lull in the conversation, the alligator was a surefire attention-getting subject.

But then on the third afternoon, oh dear.

The alligator disappeared, just vanished. We looked all around the house pond, and on into the late dusk-dark, different ones would go and watch the surface of the water for as long as any of the experts thought he could hold his breath. He was not anywhere to be seen. If you think seeing an eight-foot alligator is kind of scary, try *not* seeing one. Absolutely terrifying.

Did he crawl across the pasture over to the graveyard pond where the big children like to grab the rope swing and jump way out into the middle? Or did he lumber to the bream pond where the little ones learn how to canoe and the old ones fish? Or was he lying in wait in the thicket where we pick blackberries? Where, oh where, were the thrashing tail, the gaping jaws, the teeth, the danger, the chaos? Or was the alligator just gone, crawled back into the mystery from whence he came?

We said he was our first alligator. But really, he wasn't. I believe every person at that party had run into alligators before. Most of our deepest fears are sort of alligator fears. The alligators we see—with horrifying clarity—gliding fast and hungry toward us or toward somebody we love. And then there are the alligators we don't see—the ones holding their breath, biding their time, just under the surface—

where they wait in the dark and the muddy places.

Some of us focus so much on the alligator in the landscape that we can't see anything else—not the beauty or the possibilities or the companions around us. And some of us spend our whole lives worrying about the alligators that we don't see, so, of course, we think they're everywhere. And then there are those of us who jump right into alligator-infested waters, maybe because we are careless or foolish or proud or greedy or even just innocent.

The alligator—the chaos, the storm, the danger, the divorce, the illness, the crisis—and the human response—what you and I do in the midst of chaos—and the presence of God in chaos—these are profound issues of faith. And our trust—not in our alligator expertise but in God—is what we work out or try to avoid working out all of our lives.

So remember Job?

He can be our alligator teacher here. The winds blow. Illnesses menace. Friends get self-righteous. Money runs out. Loved ones die. The alligators lash their tails and snap their jaws. Fearful times. Bad times. And then from God Almighty comes even more bad news, or at least hard news.

For the strange and cross-shaped truth of catastrophe is a hard word literally spoken by God out of the

storm, out of the whirlwind. And God's hard word is that we are not ever going to understand, much less control the catastrophe—not us, not Job, not Job's friends, not all the alligator experts in the world.

We are not ever going to understand and control the *why* and *what* and *how* of evil and suffering and chaos. That is the hard word of God in the whirlwind, in the chaos, in the alligators—hard news for human beings, limited, bound-up creatures that we are, living not in paradise but all of us living and dying east of Eden.

But after all, where were we when it all got made? When the foundation of the earth and the morning stars and the wild ox and the storehouses of snow and the home of the east wind and Leviathan and the soaring hawk and the springs of the sea and the dwelling of the light and the gates of death and the gates of deep darkness were made by God?

The hard news is that the Creator does not place us and our fears and our pain in the center of the universe. And we are never, ever going to control the chaos. We are sure never going to control God, not even by doing it all right, not even by our morality, not even by our faithfulness.

Job stayed faithful through the worst that can happen. And even then he cried, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last

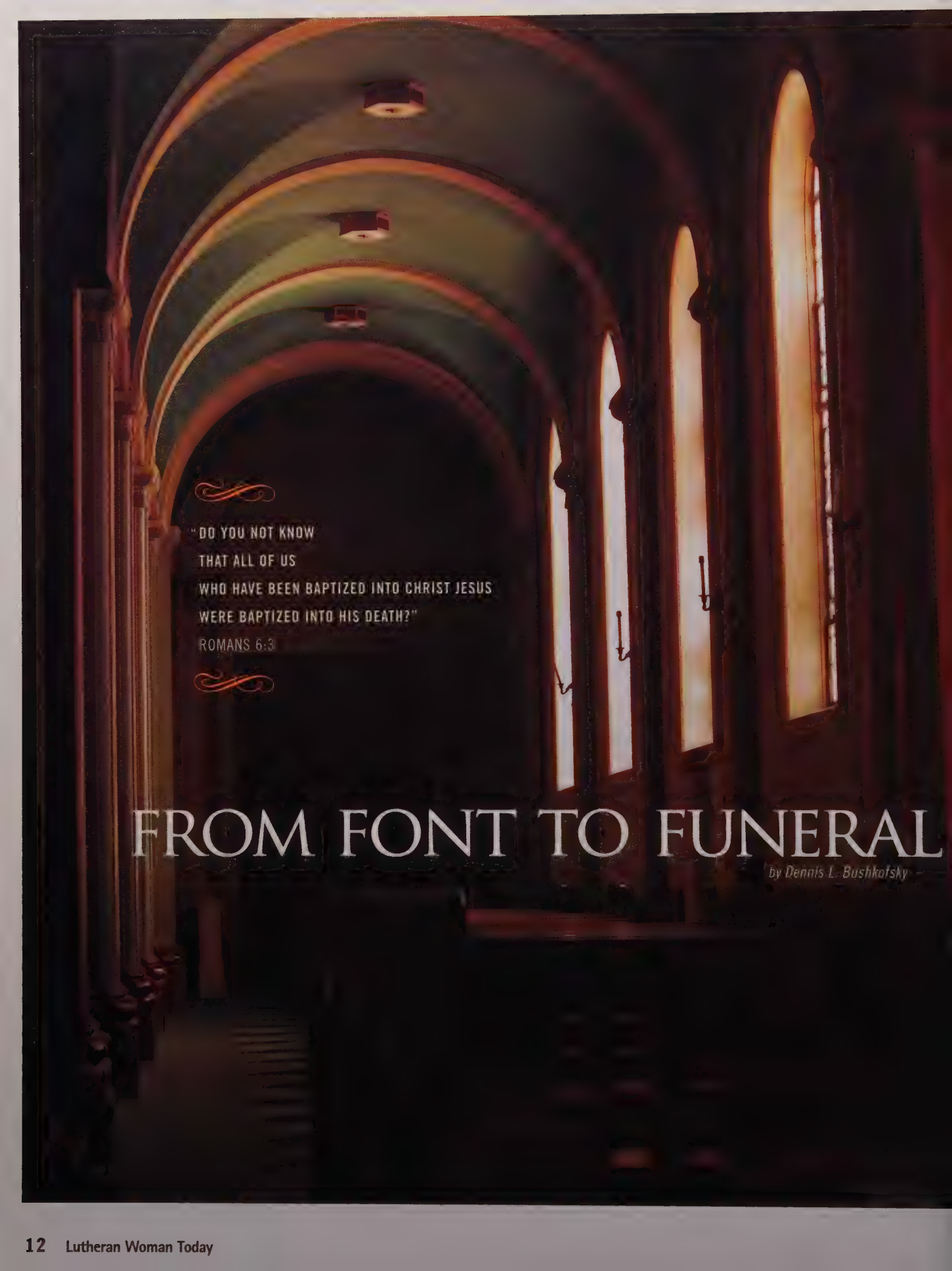
he will stand upon the earth . . . and I shall see God and not as a stranger." Job knew that. Job kept the faith. And he hurt bad, and the chaos swirled anyway. And that seems like bad news to me.

But listen.

Somewhere in the mystery of God—we don't know how, we don't know why—that hard word, the bad news, touches good news, touches gospel, touches grace. And the hard words of *suffering* and *chaos* and *beyond our control*, and the gentle words of *grace* and *providence* and *redemption*—are true and connected in a cross-shaped way that we cannot understand, we can only experience. Because the Word of God, hard and graceful, became flesh and dwelt among us. And still gets in the boat with us, right in the middle of the chaos and the storm. And speaks the Word, not only out of the storm but into the storm. And speaks, "Peace. Be still." Because God is Emmanuel. God is with us. And sooner or later the wind will cease. And there will be great calm.

P.S. We never found that particular alligator. But of course, there have been others. So it goes. 🌿

The Rev. Martha Sterne is rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Maryville, Tenn. She is author of two books, *Earthly Good: Seeing Heaven on Earth* (OSL Publications, 2003) and *Alive and Loose in the Ordinary: Stories of the Incarnation* (Morehouse Publishing, 2006).



“DO YOU NOT KNOW
THAT ALL OF US
WHO HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST JESUS
WERE BAPTIZED INTO HIS DEATH?”
ROMANS 6:3

FROM FONT TO FUNERAL

by Dennis L. Bushkotsky

In November,

On All Saints Day, we often remember those whose funerals were held in our communities and congregations over the past year. With average life spans increasing in recent decades that often means we honor those who lived into old age. Why, then, as we consider All Saints Day, do we link funerals and baptisms, which are most often celebrated with the very young, with new life?

Actually, death and life, funerals and baptisms, have quite a lot to do with one another. From Romans 6:3–4 we read: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

Clothed in Christ

The apostle Paul goes on to say that dying with Christ means that we will also live with him (Romans 6:8). In this manner, baptism—as well as death—acknowledges that we are joined both to Christ’s death and resurrection. These verses from the New Testament are often read at the beginning of a funeral service (see *Lutheran Book of Worship*, page 206). This is the point of the service in which a white funeral pall may be

placed over a casket; this too is an allusion to baptism.

We understand baptism itself as a type of clothing (see Galatians 3:27). When baptism by immersion is practiced, the newly baptized need to put on a clean and dry set of clothes soon after coming up out of the water. In some traditions, these dry clothes may be very similar to the white garments that many worship leaders often wear. Even if a special garment is not provided for the newly baptized, infants often wear white baptismal gowns or other white clothing for their baptism. Putting on a white garment is symbolic of the purity of Christ. Whether it is used at baptism or at a funeral, a white garment is also symbolic of the redeemed in the book of Revelation (6:11).

Bathed in the light of Christ

Light is another symbol that is common to both baptisms and funerals. Many congregations light an Easter (or *paschal*) candle during the Easter vigil service and keep it lit throughout the Easter season. This same candle is also lit throughout the year whenever there is a baptism or a funeral. At a baptism, it is common to give a small candle lit from the Easter candle to the newly baptized as a symbol of Christ’s light marking the path of each Christian. The Easter candle often leads the procession into and out of a funeral

service. The Easter candle stands as a constant reminder of Christ’s presence through all circumstances of our lives, as well as through death and on to eternity. A number of congregations have also begun having many small candles available at the festival of All Saints (November 1 or the first Sunday of November) for worshipers to light and to remember the lives of people who have died.

Marked with the sign of Christ

In baptism new Christians are marked with the sign of the cross as a further demonstration of being united to Christ’s death and resurrection. Martin Luther invited people to remember their baptism daily by tracing the sign of the cross upon themselves as they awoke and as they went to bed (see the orders for morning and evening prayer in Luther’s *Small Catechism*, included in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*). Many people may also trace the sign of the cross upon themselves at the invocation that often begins our weekly worship. Signing with the cross may also be used at the committal portion of the funeral service as the body or ashes are buried or laid to rest.

In these ways the sign of the cross may be said to accompany the entire life of a Christian, beginning from baptism through each day of life, at worship, as well as in death.

Death to the old Adam

Baptism is a moment when we clearly draw the line between that which keeps us away from God and that which brings us closer to God. Before confessing our faith, we renounce the ways of sin that draw us away from God (*ELW*, p. 229). After the baptism, a prayer for the strengthening of the Holy Spirit's presence is said for the newly baptized.

Martin Luther referred to the *old Adam* (sin, the devil) as needing to be drowned so that the new person in Christ could emerge (see Luther's *Large Catechism*). Though this happens just once for each of us through baptism, our remembrance of this act is an important aspect of daily devotion, since the struggles we face between good and evil, sin and faith, are not finished until we die.

The font as a place for the living

As congregations begin to make baptismal fonts more accessible, particularly near the entrance to the church or at another place where people can easily approach them, the font has also served as a powerful symbol during funeral services. Perhaps the casket is placed near the font at the beginning or even throughout the funeral liturgy. When the pall is placed on the casket near the font while the words from Romans 6 are read, the connection between baptism and the

death of a Christian could hardly be stronger.

One congregation's baptismal font is surrounded by a columbarium. One cannot use that space for a baptism without being reminded of the local saints who have previously lived and worshiped in that space; but neither can one go to a committal service there for someone who has died without being reminded of God's eternal promises to us in baptism.



Homeward bound

While I have often led funeral services that are away from a church building (such as at funeral homes or cemetery chapels), I have always felt that funeral services held in the place where the congregation ordinarily worships (and particularly where the symbols of baptism are present and visible) allow many more resources to be used for pastoral care and consolation.

As a preacher, I believe that the spoken word is important, particularly in the funeral sermon. At a funeral, though, many of the ritual actions we perform can also speak to us at a time when adequate words may be difficult to find. The journeys that we make throughout

our lives in coming to the font, in being seated to listen to the Scripture and preaching, and in coming to receive communion around the altar are familiar to most of us, and they all may be repeated during the context of a funeral. These familiar patterns can be profoundly comforting in the presence of grief when everything may seem so disconnected from our ordinary experience. When churchly and baptismal symbols can be employed at the time of a funeral, I have always felt that the experience was more deeply comforting than when these symbols are not present at all.


How meaningful the baptismal symbols were made clear to me when I presided at the funeral of a 90-year-old woman who had been an active church member and whose five-generation family was deeply connected to the life of that congregation. We gathered for a morning funeral service at which a number of relatives and other members of the congregation were present. After placing the funeral pall on the casket, an assisting minister carrying the Easter candle led the mourner into place as the congregation sang "Guide me ever, great Redeemer." We read Scripture passages that had been dear to the woman and were meaningful to all of us. Even during the middle of winter—and the season of Lent at that—the congregation sang hymns and heard Scripture

readings speaking of our baptismal life and of the resurrection's promise. We celebrated Holy Communion. Then we had a meal together in the church's fellowship hall.


When lunch was over, the closest relatives and friends traveled an hour to the 250-year-old church where the woman had grown up worshipping. Here, we held a second, shorter service with relatives

who could not come to the earlier service. We took the funeral pall with us and placed the casket next to the font where the woman had been baptized. After this second service, we processed out into the churchyard where the burial took place amid gravestones showing names that would have been familiar to the woman now at rest.

This dear saint had traveled

widely in her lifetime, and she had returned to the place from whence she had come. This would have been true whether or not we had gone back to her ancestral community, since her home had been with God from the day of her baptism. 

Dennis L. Bushkofsky is an interim pastor of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod (ELCA) and the editor of *Liturgy*, a quarterly journal of the Liturgical Conference.



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LET US PRAY

The Examen

by Debra K. Farrington

I never took more satisfaction in giving a gift than I did in the quilts I used to give to close friends every Advent. I made about 15 of the same quilt design and sent a letter along with each of them telling what the quilts had taught me that year. After I had been doing this for a number of years, my spiritual director showed me all the quilts and asked if I could see—from the designs, patterns, and colors—how I had grown over the years. I was surprised to discover that I could.

Most of us don't recognize growth in our spiritual lives until we look at it carefully, something we don't do very often. We think we're just going along as usual, making little spiritual progress, but that's probably not the case. That's where the prayer of examen comes in handy. This simple practice, done regularly, is an excellent way of seeing how your relationship with God is doing.

The practice is simple. Sit comfortably and breathe gently, letting go of whatever agendas or worries you have at the moment. Then look back over the last 24 hours. What were you doing during that time? Who were you with? How did you feel? What were you thinking about? Calmly recollect the events of the last day without making any judgments about them.

Now, with the events of the last day in mind, look for moments when you were cooperating with God's desires. When, in the last day, did you respond to the world around you as God hopes you will? When did you notice God's

presence with you? Take a moment to offer thanks for these observations.

Next, look for the times during the last day when you resisted God. When were you responding to those around you, or to circumstances, in ways that might not be what God hopes for from you? Take a few minutes to confess these missteps to God, and to ask for and receive forgiveness. Close the exercise by thanking God for any discoveries that came to you.

That's all there is to the exercise, but don't let its simplicity fool you. If you do this exercise regularly, and particularly if you keep a journal about what you've observed, you'll start to see patterns and get a better sense of when you're more likely to follow or resist God. Over time you'll notice places where you've grown and where you're continuing to resist God, which can help you make any changes you feel God desires from you. Practice this on your own; it also works well with groups.

Resources

Read *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*, by Dennis Linn, Sheila Linn, and Matthew Linn (1995), for an excellent introduction to the practice of examen for individuals and groups.

Also take a look at Chapter 3, "The Prayer of Examen," in Richard J. Foster's 1992 book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. 🌿

Debra Farrington has written eight books on Christian spirituality and is retreat leader and speaker. www.debrafarrington.com.



GRANTS

Raising Up Health

by Audrey Novak Riley

SENATE BEAN SOUP

- 1 lb. dried white beans
- 2 c. ham, cubed (or ham bone with meat)
- 1 c. mashed potatoes (or 1/2 c. mashed potato flakes)
- 3 onions, chopped
- 1 small bunch celery, chopped (including tops)
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- 1/4 c. dried parsley
- Water

Night before: Put beans in cold water to cover; cover pot. Let soak overnight.

Morning: Rinse & drain beans. Place all ingredients in Crock-Pot. Add water to cover. Cook on low setting for 6 to 8 hours.

Just before serving: Add more water if necessary. If using ham bone, remove from soup, cut off meat, & stir diced meat into soup. Stir and serve. Serves 6 or more.

Six young women of high school age gather around a woman preparing a delicious dish to be made in a Crock-Pot. They take careful notes as she describes the nutritional benefits of the different ingredients, discuss where to find the best bargains, and ask dozens of questions. As the meal cooks, the students work together on a sample budget and shopping list so they can make this healthful recipe at home.

Home economics class at the local high school? Not quite.

This is a session of the Fit Foods 4 U program of the Appalachian Women's Guild in rural Tracy City, Tennessee. The low-income young women, are either new mothers or at risk for early pregnancy. They gather monthly to learn about healthy eating, smart shopping, and easy, delicious cooking. The Guild predicts that the students' new ideas will spread quickly among their friends and relatives, helping to improve unhealthy eating patterns that lead to a high rate of obesity-related illnesses in the community. By the end of the course, each student will have a collection of appealing recipes, the skills to prepare them, and a new Crock-Pot of her own.

Fit Foods 4 U is just one of the 53 creative programs that were awarded a Women of the ELCA grant in 2006. Your gifts and your purchases of Women of the ELCA pins (by Pins by Lucinda) made it possible for us to award \$107,500 to 38 domestic and 15 international programs, all dedicated to raising up healthy

women and girls. (Your Lucinda pin purchases expanded our giving power by \$28,000.)

Programs eligible for grants

This triennium, the Women of the ELCA grants are awarded to programs that support healing and wholeness for women of all ages through the affirmation and advancement of women's emotional, physical, and spiritual health. Please see our Web site, www.womenoftheelca.org/whatwedo/grants.html for more detailed information, including details on writing your grant proposal. Proposals are accepted between December 15, 2006, and February 15, 2007.

How you can help

Through your generosity, Women of the ELCA has provided \$2.7 million in grants to more than 700 recipient organizations since 1988. Each year, the need and the requests for assistance increase.

To give to the grants fund, send your check, made payable to Women of the ELCA Grants Program No. 528, to Women of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631. Or you may use your credit card to contribute on-line to other Women of the ELCA programs at www.elca.org/giving. Click on Women of the ELCA on the left side of the page.

The recipients of Women of the ELCA grants thank you! 🌸

Audrey Novak Riley is associate editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.



E Alone T I N G

by Sonia Solomonson

I've spent my lifetime of Thanksgivings in a wide variety of ways: surrounded by a room (or house) full of family, with a smaller set of family members, with dear friends who are like family to me, or with a collection of people who join forces (and food) because they're

not going elsewhere that day. I've spent one or two Thanksgivings by myself, and once I helped serve food to people at a shelter.

How will you spend the day? At a family gathering? A gathering of friends? Or might you spend your Thanksgiving alone?

Be honest now: Did you recoil at the idea of eating Thanksgiving dinner alone? You're not the only one who does. Messages and images surround us in our society—and in our churches—that imply that being alone is bad. The idea is that if we're alone, especially on holidays

we must be unloved or unlovable. But is that really true?

Try going out to a restaurant by yourself. Chances are you'll be asked, "Just *one*?" and promptly seated at a tiny table back by the kitchen. I've experienced that more than once in the years following my divorce. Early on I didn't question it. Now I know I can cheerfully request a table by a window or some desirable location—and I know I can have a perfectly enjoyable dinner too. I didn't arrive at that comfort zone overnight, though.

ALONE equals LONELY?

The lesson that *aloneness* and *loneliness* aren't synonymous developed over time for me. My three sons have established their own homes, and I live alone. When I feel lonely, I have choices to make: Shall I call a close friend from my network of friends? Should I see a movie or go for a restorative walk in the forest preserve? Shall I visit my grandchildren? They're always good for my head—and my heart! Or shall I just *feel* the loneliness, examine it and see what it's all about? Perhaps there's something else going on that I need to tend. Maybe I have an issue at work that's producing anxiety or fear and that brings out my feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Perhaps I have problems in a relationship that need resolution, and

that makes me feel disconnected.

Once I determine what's going on, I have many choices besides self-pity (though sometimes we need a short "pity party"). I don't have to jump to the conclusion that I need a spouse or a roommate just because I feel lonely from time to time. People with significant and primary relationships feel lonely too. That is the little secret we singles seldom hear. But it's true. We *all* feel lonely at times. Our loneliness is telling us something. We can learn to listen to it—and make choices that will lead us to health and happiness.

Those of you who enjoy a healthy marriage or other primary relationship are blessed indeed. Staying engaged with another person through life's twists and turns and each person's development journey takes courage. It's not for the faint of heart. Living alone isn't for the faint of heart either. It takes courage to explore and reject society's messages that the unpartnered are somehow "less than."

No matter whether we live alone or share our lives with someone, no matter whether that state is temporary or permanent, the fact remains that we all still need to be intentional about cultivating nurturing relationships. If you are married or in a significant relationship, you still need to have friendships and connection with others. Many studies have shown that

people who are happiest and who adjust most quickly to life crises are those who have a broad network of family and friends.

We have options in seeking good relationships: our congregation, neighbors, acquaintances, coworkers, members of organizations to which we belong, and many more. Relationships come in a variety of forms too. In some, we only share activities. In others, we share deeply of who we are. In still others, we share our spiritual journey. And for some, we share only a bloodline. On the other hand, sometimes family members are good friends too.

FREEDOM to CHOOSE

Choice is the key here, as it is in so much of life. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, concentration-camp survivor Victor Frankl describes the cruel and inhumane treatment he and his fellow prisoners endured at the hands of the Nazis. What Frankl discovered is what we also need to learn: No matter what the circumstances, we have the freedom to choose how we will respond. Frankl saw that some men in the camp shared their bread with another. While some shut down inside, others still appreciated the beauty of a tree that grew outside the window.

Perhaps living alone wasn't your choice. You still have choices:

Will you make it a rich, healthy, and good experience? Or will you remain miserable, blaming someone else (God?) and doing nothing to reach out toward happiness?

Open yourself to God's extravagant love. Pay attention to the many ways God graces and blesses your days: a child's smile, the velvet softness of a rose shyly opening up to the light, the cardinal singing as you awaken, or a considerate driver who lets you change lanes during your morning commute. Let yourself focus on God's love and become a channel for that love to fill you and extend out to everyone in your life.

I've begun keeping a daily gratitude journal, where I record things for which I'm grateful. This takes only minutes a day. Always it focuses me on the beauty around me rather than on the problems I might face.

I'm reminded of the story of the wise Cherokee grandfather who tells his grandson, "Grandson, I have a war going on inside me." His grandson is shocked. "Who's fighting, Grandfather?" The wise old man says that he has a good wolf and a bad wolf fighting inside. The good wolf represents love, kindness, gratitude, compassion, and all the good things we do. The bad wolf represents hatred, violence, greed, jealousy, and the hurtful things we do. "Which wolf

will win, Grandfather?" asks the little boy. "Why, the one I feed, of course," says Grandfather.

Which wolf do you feed? Sometimes I have focused so thoroughly on the negatives in my life that I have totally missed the beautiful flowers growing up through that fertilizer. The wise Cherokee grandfather reminds me to feed the good wolf.



Have you had disappointments in life? Of course. Has everything in my life gone just as I had hoped? Of course not. After grieving those sorrows and disappointments, it's time to move on. People say, "Get over it." That sounds harsh, but it's true. We need to feel the sadness, grieve for lost hopes and dreams, and then move on to enjoy the life we have rather than the one we may have wanted.

AN **inside** JOB

The life we have includes relationships, whether we are married or single. They take time. Like a garden, however, a good relationship will give back far more than you invest. Our lives are enriched by varied connections. Because of them, our hearts will be enlarged and all of life will be happier.

That includes our relationship with God. Spend time with God. Listen. Don't do all the talking. It includes your relationship with yourself. Once you can live by yourself and be comfortable and happy with yourself, you're ready to live with someone else. Other people can't make us happy. Don't expect that. Happiness is an inside job. It comes from accepting God's unconditional, extravagant love for us and loving ourselves because of it. That is what opens us up so love can flow out to others. It always comes back to us, heaped up and overflowing.

Let your journey unfold. God will surprise you with blessings you never imagined. Watch for them. They're probably there now. While you're at it, fill your vase with flowers, light the candles, break out your best china, and cook up a great meal for a good companion—you. 🌸

Sonia Solomonson, managing editor of *The Lutheran*, enjoys meals alone, with family and friends, or with her three sons and daughters-in-law and eight grandchildren.



WE RECOMMEND

Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

Bold Women of the Reformation trip

Women of the ELCA is celebrating its 20th anniversary with a trip to Germany focusing on the lives of Martin Luther, Katharina von Bora Luther, and other women of the Reformation. Developed in partnership with the ELCA Wittenberg Center, this outstanding opportunity takes place April 16–30, 2007. To learn more, go to www.womenoftheelca.org/20years/germany.html or call Linda McKinsey at 800-638-3522, ext. 2497.

Worship Boldly

Worship Boldly, the newest worship resource for Women of the ELCA, has more than ever before. This revised and updated worship book contains a wide range of prayers, blessings, and services, including a commissioning of new officers, Thankoffering notes, a quilt dedication, and much more. It includes several litanies and more than 40 songs and canticles, both new and familiar, as well as the special triennium hymn, “Signs and Wonders,” written by Susan Palo Cherwein for Women of the ELCA.

Worship Boldly helps you explore the theme “Act Boldly” through song, prayer, and liturgy. It also uplifts the women’s health initiative by providing liturgical resources relating to health, healing, and wholeness.

This book is perfect for synodical women’s gatherings, retreats, and congregational units. And at only \$7.99, you can get one for every woman in your group. Order today through Augsburg Fortress: 800-328-4648; ISBN 6-0002-0452-3.

Lutheran radio program

Tune in to *Grace Matters* for a fresh expression of faith-filled radio. Join host Peter Marty and his guests for weekly interviews, Bible-based meditations, inspiring music, and life-changing stories. For 30 minutes each week, Pastor Marty connects everyday life to God’s amazing grace. The program has featured such diverse guests as Kathy Holmgren, wife of Seattle Seahawks football coach Mike Holmgren; Senator George McGovern, speaking on hunger; biblical scholar Barbara Rossing; and Joe Holt, director of executive ethics at Notre Dame University.

Find the broadcast schedule for your area or listen to past programs online at www.gracematters.org.

Learn about the Roman Catholic Church

Following centuries of division, Lutherans and Roman Catholics today are cooperating in many ways and at many levels.

Mosaic Television, the video magazine of the ELCA, has produced *Understanding the Roman Catholic Church*.

Its purpose is to help Lutherans develop a better understanding of the Roman Catholic Church, through interviews with Roman Catholic theologians, scholars, pastors, and lay people.

The program can be viewed for free on the ELCA Web site. It is also available in VHS and DVD formats.

To obtain information about Mosaic Television subscriptions and individual issues, visit www.elca.org/mosaic or call 800-638-3522, ext. 6009.



picture perfect

by Richard S. Smith





t was perfect

the polished silverware gleamed.

the china shone.

the crystal glasses sparkled.

the sweet potatoes were covered
with perfectly toasted marshmal-
ows. An artfully arranged platter of
côtes was adorned with skillfully
stuffed radish roses. The basket of

steaming hot rolls were accompa-
nied by a dish of sweet butter pats
carefully pressed into the shape of
tiny, perfect pumpkins.

The extravagant cornucopia
centerpiece overflowing with fruit
and flowers was overshadowed only
by the perfectly browned bird, the
crowning glory of the table. A more
beautiful feast could scarcely be
imagined. Amy called her family to
the table.

Little daughter Dakota came in
first. Dressed in her Sunday best, she
was the perfect addition to the pic-
ture, or she would have been if it
hadn't been for her downcast look.
She had tried to help in the kitchen,
but none of her work had made it to
the table. Her rolls had turned out
lumpy. Her radish roses lacked prop-
erly formed petals. The last straw
came when she couldn't resist reach-
ing for a marshmallow, but got a
smack on the hand instead of a treat.
She had been banished from the
kitchen, and although she had
dressed the part of a holiday reveler,
the slump of her shoulders made it
clear that her heart wasn't in it.

Teen son Tyler slouched into
the dining room behind her. He had
on his confirmation suit, but obvi-
ously wasn't happy about it. His tie
was crooked, and a thin white wire
ran from under his suit coat up to
the buds in his ears. It was clear that
Tyler couldn't name a single place
that he would rather be . . . he could

name thousands.

Uncle Steve and Aunt Cindy
came in from the family room.
Cindy gave Dakota a sympathetic
smile. Steve ruffled Tyler's hair and
noticed the wire. He signaled to his
nephew to take out the headphones.
Tyler rolled his eyes, but did as his
uncle suggested, and just in time.

Amy came in from the kitchen.
She had been up at dawn after toss-
ing and turning all night. All day,
she had averted one kitchen catas-
trophe after another to get this meal
on the table. And what had been
husband Bill's response when she
called that all was ready? "Honey,
it's third and inches. I'll be there
in a minute." Bill came in shortly
thereafter, barely glancing at his
gathered family and the beautiful
table, looking a little sheepish, as he
hurried to his place at the head of
the table.

Later, with her hands in the
sink, Amy found herself suddenly
teary. She couldn't put her finger on
the source of her sorrow. She had
done everything humanly possible
to make this the perfect Thanksgiv-
ing. The food had been delicious—
even Bill said so. Cindy's drippy
pumpkin pie had been surprisingly
tasty. But the conversation had been
so stiff. Dakota had barely said a
word. She'd hardly eaten, for that
matter. She just sat there, staring
down at her plate, picking at her
food. She was almost as uncommu-

nicative as her brother. The only time he opened his mouth was to ask someone to pass more food, or to shovel it in.

And then it seemed that everyone had fled the table as soon as possible. Football, it appeared, was the real main event of the day. Cindy had offered to help clean up, but after the table was cleared Amy had shooed her out of the kitchen. Last year Cindy had started to put the crystal right into the dishwasher, if you could believe it.

Tempted by perfection

There is a longing shared by millions to have the ideal “Kodak moment” as we gather to celebrate the holidays. In our crazy headlong culture, we ache for the contentment of everything in order, as it should be, as we want it to be, as it never seems to turn out. No matter how hard we work, no matter how hard we try, little things and big things gum up the works and derail the plans. Something as small as a child’s pout can take the shine off the moment.

But it isn’t just during the holidays. We are driven to do our best every day, but we want more than our best—we want our work, our family, our vacation, our home, our lives to be perfect. Aren’t we supposed to give it our all? Shouldn’t we strive to create an exemplary life? Where would we be if every-

one decided to settle for “good enough”? Doesn’t our faith encourage us to lead a God-pleasing life, and doesn’t that require us to be our best, most perfect self?

Here’s the rub: The drive for perfection can easily become a catalyst for sin. I speak as one who knows. I freely admit that I am a recovering perfectionist. I never actually attained perfection, ever, but there was a time in my life when it seemed to be just beyond my grasp, but never beyond my striving. Some people are tempted to sin by greed or lust. In my weaker moments I’m tempted by perfection. How could it be sinful to do your best?

Perfectionism is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. As we whirl along in a frenzy of perfectionism, many of our actions and achievements get praise and admiration, but there is a dark side. Looking back, I can see that I was indulging in a number of sins that were drowned out by the accolades at the time, but are obvious to me now.

Sloth

First was the sin of sloth. How can you be lazy when you are working yourself to death to be perfect? I was lazy because I was able to excuse myself for what I didn’t get done. I was so busy trying to be perfect, I didn’t have time to be human. I was in denial about the

limits of my time and energy, but that didn’t make my limits go away. For every extra task I added to my list, something else was neglected. For example, whenever I was too busy building houses for Habitat for Humanity, or taking soup to a shut-in, or bringing home work so that I could put a few more hours into polishing a project, I didn’t deal with my mail—well, what more could anyone expect of me?

Despite my growing piles of papers and mail, people were still praising me for my volunteer efforts and workload, which meant that I wasn’t really bad for not getting to those things that I should have done, right? Who ever praises you for getting all the piles of paper sorted and filed and filled out and paid and shredded? I was just too tired, and who could blame me? I had more important things to do. Who were they to judge me anyway? Look at all the good that I was accomplishing!

This one little falsehood can cause a world of pain. It is as if your relationships develop a slow leak of respect and caring. There is a saying, “No guts, no glory,” but I’ve discovered “all glory leads to no guts.” It really is the little things that count. Guts are not glamorous, but they are important for a healthy life. Those little things that get neglected eventually demand their day, and it can be a very unpleasant day.

Is my house clean now? No way! But I recognize that my mess is my own responsibility. I don't expect that what I ought to do should take care of itself just because I opt to do something else, even if it is "perfect," in my opinion.

False witness

Another sin of perfectionism is the sin of bearing false witness. It isn't that a perfectionist is intentionally untruthful; it's more that the vision of the perfectionist is distorted. Being a perfectionist is like wearing smog-colored glasses. Instead of seeing what is actually good and lovely, right and true, a perfectionist will focus only on what is lacking and flawed. It is as if the image in my head of what would be "perfect" is a lens that makes me see the world off-kilter. Instead of seeing the world as it is, with appreciation and thanksgiving, perfectionism drives us to see only what could be made better.

When I allow myself this "perfection vision" I am deprived of a certain generosity of spirit. God's incredible gift of life becomes a problem to be solved instead of a journey to be enjoyed. Theologians in the process school of theology claim that what pleases God most is our enjoyment of God. To truly enjoy God, we have to appreciate what has been given by God, not what we imagine (or wish) God

intended to give. We must see the beauty in life even though it is flawed, even though we are flawed.

Idolatry

But the most damning sin of perfectionism is the sin of idolatry. When we become obsessed with perfection we presume that not only are we capable of perfection, but we can achieve it consistently. Worse than that, we presume that our own standards are what perfection really looks like. Consciously or unconsciously, we set ourselves in competition with others to meet our standards of perfection.

When God chose to reveal the true standard of perfection to humanity, we didn't have a clue about what we were seeing. The world rejected Jesus Christ. He was associated with the sick, the troubled, and the people society rejected. He was killed, and in that humble, broken moment on the cross, we finally see what perfection really looks like. It isn't polished and attractive, but roughhewn and bloody. It looks like perfect love.

That really is the key, isn't it? Our faith calls us to be our self—our best self, surely, but our true self most of all. We live as flawed people in a beloved but broken world. Our striving is driven by an idea of perfection that comes from an unreal world of fantasies. That isn't the world that God so loves. We

imagine the perfect family, the perfect job, the perfect home, and then we push and pull and stretch our lives to fit the mold that we have created, no matter who or what must reform to fit our fantasy. God doesn't create this imaginary world, we do. God created a world that is still in the process of becoming, of changing, of growing. God created us, and loves us now, warts and all, not when we're "perfect."

By all means, we need to aim high and do our best, but we should never let the quest for "perfection" drive us away from the love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things—even lumpy rolls, drippy pies, and the imperfect people who remind us just how perfect God's love must be. Rejoice in the knowledge of God's perfect love for you, just as you are. Appreciate the limits with which you were created. Then you can work on being perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect—that is, perfect in love. 🌸

The Rev. Serena S. Sellers is assistant to the bishop for connections and resources in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod of the ELCA and adjunct faculty at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. She lives in Quakertown, Pa., with her very patient and understanding family, the Rev. Raymond Miller and their two daughters, Lydia and Evelyn.



BIBLE STUDY

HOPE IN GOD IN TIMES OF SUFFERING SESSION 3

Suffering as Becoming

by Terry and Faith Fretheim

TEXTS USED IN THIS SESSION

James 1:12	Hebrews 5:7
Genesis 3:16	Mark 15:34
Genesis 2:18	Matthew 4:1-11
Genesis 2:23	Hebrews 5:8
Mark 6:47	Hebrews 4:15
Mark 1:35	Genesis 1:28
Mark 3:21	Genesis 1:31
Mark 3:31-35	Ecclesiastes 9:11
Genesis 3:1-6	John 9:2
Matthew 26:37-40	Job 38:22-30

Overview

In this session we will look at suffering as part of the process of becoming. Certain types of suffering may be seen as good and can serve life as God intends it to be. We will look especially at suffering caused by human limitations and suggest some reflections on the natural world that God has created. Chance and

randomness are also part of God's world, a world that is still in the process of becoming.

Theme verse

James 1:12

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Opening

Hymn "Be Thou My Vision"
(*With One Voice* 776)

Prayer

Who's here today?

If you feel comfortable doing so, briefly share an experience of limitation, loneliness, anxiety, or temptation whose end result was good, positive, a growing experience, and a life-changing or even life-saving event.

Suffering as part of God's good creation

Suffering is a fact of life. Every one of us suffers at some time or other. But not all suffering is the same. It can come from different causes and lead to different results.

In the next three sessions, we will consider several different root causes of suffering. In this session we consider suffering as part of God's good creation.

Suffering and human limitations

We often think that all suffering is bad—something to be avoided at all costs. Or, we often think that all suffering is due to sin. But God created human beings in such a way that some suffering is simply part of life. Suffering goes with being human; it is a part of the human condition. In other words, sometimes suffering serves life as God intends it to be. There are several ways in which we can speak of suffering and life in these terms.

Limits

Having limits is an integral part of what it means to be a human being—limits of knowledge, agility, strength, and so on. Adam and Eve were not little gods without limitations. Quite apart from sin, if they tried to go past their human limitations, they would suffer, just as we would today.

Think of the limits of knowledge. We can work to stretch those limits, and that always involves some suffering. For example, if Adam and Eve had gone to school, struggle and challenge would have been inevitable parts of their learning and development. That has always been true for human beings.

→ Think of the challenges you (or someone else) have faced in your own education or vocation. Was the struggle worth it?

Or, think of physical limitations. If Adam had tried to lift a rock that was too heavy for him, he would have had a pain in his back, just as we would.

We are told in Genesis 3:16 that one of the effects of sin was that women's pain in childbearing would increase. This suggests that even before sin entered the world, women experienced pain in the process of giving birth—if there had been none, it couldn't have increased.

We know from our own experience what it means to suffer because of our own human limitations.

→ Name a time when your own human limitations led to suffering for you.

But think about it. If nothing were inaccessible or out of reach, and if there were no unfulfilled dreams, there would be no wonder, no surprise, and no gratitude. Genuine life depends in some sense on the struggle to be.

> What are some ways your own limitations—of knowledge, agility, and strength—have contributed to your life and health?

There are other forms of suffering that can be seen as good, such as the suffering caused by a significant change in your life (adding a new family member isn't all joy all the time) or the suffering that accompanies the loss of something (a daughter moves out on her own for the first time). And sin may add to suffering, making matters worse. Consider driving on a slippery road. A driver could pass a slower car cautiously, or could angrily "floor it." Which one would more likely lead to an accident?

> List some examples of how sin has complicated sufferings that are part of God's good creation.

God is, of course, at work for good in all suffering, whatever the reason.

It is also important to say that suffering should not be sought out. As if we were not suffering enough! Pain (emotional or physical) should not be cultivated for its own sake. Suffering should not be celebrated just because some suffering may be good.

Loneliness

Loneliness is a form of suffering that existed before sin came into the world. God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18): Adam must have been suffering from loneliness. If he had not been so lonely, he might not have felt the same joy when the woman was created (Genesis 2:23).

The Gospels often depict Jesus as "alone" (Mark 6:47) or in "deserted" places (Mark 1:35). And, of course, he had no wife or children (see Mark 3:21, 31–35). It can rightly be said that Jesus, who was sinless, experienced loneliness for the sake of human beings who often suffer from loneliness.

> Recall a situation when you were alone for some time, whether you chose the situation or not. Did you suffer in your solitude? How might that suffering be good? When might it cease to be good and become bad?

Sin can turn a healthy loneliness into an unhealthy one and draw a person into something destructive. For example, consider what could happen in a commuting marriage.

When the American Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church in America, and Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches merged to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988, it was suggested to Faith, who had been working with ALC Women in Minneapolis, that she might go to work with Women of the ELCA in Chicago. Since Terry worked in Minneapolis, that would mean our being apart every Monday through Friday.

We had never thought of such a thing in our whole 32 years (then) of married life!

However, after much talking and praying we decided to give it a try. Our two daughters thought we were modern and cool. Cool, maybe; very lonely at times, definitely.

So, what could be good about the separation and the loneliness we experienced? Faith learned she could live alone if she had to, as did Terry. Not like it, but could do it: a big difference! Faith learned that she could fill her own gas tank; Terry learned that he could not only put his dirty laundry in the basket, but take the basket to the washing machine and then to the dryer. And, oh, the joy of getting back together.

How could this loneliness have ceased to be good and become bad? Sin could have crept in. Someone else nearby might have seemed more attractive than the faraway spouse. Alcohol or drugs might have become a way to ease the loneliness.

> What are some ways that healthy loneliness could turn sinful?

Anxiety

Anxiety is associated with what we cannot do or do not know, perhaps especially about the future.

It is often said that the serpent made Eve anxious about what she did not know, anxious about what God might not have told her, before she actually sinned (see Genesis 3:5). Eve's anxiety was good in that it could have helped her avoid the sin that she and Adam eventually committed. But Eve, rather than turning to God to ask about what she had not been told, chose instead to eat of the fruit of the tree.

Certainly Jesus, though sinless, was deeply anxious in the Garden of Gethsemane. Look at Matthew 26:37-40:

[In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus] began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."

Hebrews 5:7 speaks of Jesus in the Garden in this way: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death."

Or, think of Jesus' cry from the cross ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Mark 15:34) and the anxiety that must have prompted it. Jesus was anxious at times, and he did not sin.

Think of the mother of a toddler who has been caught sticking things into electrical outlets. The mother's anxiety for her child's safety may lead her to put covers on the outlets. In other words, her anxiety would be good suffering in the service of her child.

>> Tell the group about a time when your anxiety—about your family, your work, or your health—served your own life or the lives of others in good ways.

Of course, sin can turn healthy anxiety into a deep anxiousness, an excessive worrying about what might happen. That could lead to mental anguish or reactions toward others that do not serve life. That kind of anxiety would be an example of suffering that is no longer good.

>> If you are comfortable doing so, talk about an experience in which your anxiety—about your family, your work, or your health—became excessive and was not good for yourself or for others. Can you think of other ways anxiety can turn unhealthy and sinful?

Temptation

Temptation existed in the world before there was sin (Genesis 3:1–6). God created a world in which Adam and Eve could choose among different courses of speech or action, some good, some bad, some neutral. Life is not a programmed affair. Human experience often calls for thinking through and choosing among various possible courses of action. Having such choices to consider is a good thing. But the process often involves temptation, or testing. And here we can suffer.

We know that Jesus, sinless Son of God though he was and is, was tested, or tempted, by the devil (Matthew 4:1–11). This cannot have been easy for him. Hebrews 5:8 may be alluding to this: “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” In response to the devil’s temptations, Jesus remembered his Scripture and quoted three key passages to the devil (see Matthew 4:4, 7, 10). And, as Hebrews 4:15 puts it, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize

with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested [tempted] as we are, yet without sin.”

Though we may find ourselves sorely tempted, the fact that we face these tests is beneficial. What if human beings always, effortlessly, did the right thing and were never tempted not to? Doesn’t the suffering of the struggle between doing the right thing and committing a wrong have the potential to strengthen us as human beings? As James 1:12 puts it: “Blessed is anyone who endures temptation.” We can give in to temptation, of course, and make the wrong choice. And that may lead to suffering that will not benefit us or those around us.

> Think of a time when you were tempted to commit a wrong but struggled to do what was right. How might that struggle have helped you, indeed, strengthened you in your faith? Share this with the group if you feel comfortable.

Suffering and nature

We begin by taking a closer look at the creation story in Genesis 1:28, 31.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” . . . God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Among the commands God gave the newly created human beings in Genesis 1:28 was the command to “subdue” the earth. Yet, all of God’s creations are “very good” (1:31). If the creation is very good, why would it be necessary to subdue it?

The verb *to subdue* means something like “to bring

order out of disorder.” This suggests that the world is good, as God said, but not perfect. God’s creation is not static, but dynamic and developing. God’s calling creation “good” means that nothing that God has created is evil.

The universe is still developing. In some sense, creation is a project of God, begun “in the beginning” and developing through the millennia as God moves toward a new heaven and a new earth.

The words of Sibley Towner (*Genesis*, Westminster John Knox, 2001, p. 21) may be helpful: “If there were no freedom in this creation, no touches of disorder, no open ends, then moral choice, creativity, and excellence could not arise. The world would be a monotonous cycle of inevitability, a dull-as-dishwater world of puppets and automatons.”

From another angle, God did not create a completely finished world in the beginning. God created a world that is in the process of becoming. Think of glaciers, hailstorms, earthquakes, blizzards, volcanoes, forest fires, tsunamis, and hurricanes, and their ongoing part in the continued formation of the planet.

These natural events are examples of creation being what it was created to be and therefore should be considered good. This is an orderly process in many ways; there is a certain amount of randomness and chance that is also a part of the process. As Ecclesiastes 9:11 puts it, “Time and chance happen to them all.”

> When tornadoes or floods devastate a neighborhood, there is suffering for a while, and then rebuilding takes place. The new construction could make a neighborhood better than it was before the natural destruction. Think of an encounter of your own with natural events. Could what happened be attributable to chance? In what way did this natural event contribute to order? To disorder?

Human beings and animals may suffer in a world that is in the process of becoming. This is because we are part of this natural world, and God has chosen not to insulate us from creation’s ongoing process. Because of the interconnected world in which we live, we may well get hurt by what happens in the natural order. One thinks of the randomness of the gene pool (which may lead to disabilities in children or adults). Or one thinks of encounters with storms at one end of the scale and viruses on the other. Sin can intensify the encounter and the associated suffering. For example, the reckless use of alcohol by a pregnant woman can harm her unborn child.

Is it possible that some sicknesses and disabilities were a part of God’s original creation, before sin came into the picture? Listen to these words from Dr. John Polkinghorne, a theologian and physicist (*Quarks, Chaos and Christianity*, Crossroads, 1994, Leaders Guide, p. 45):

We tend to believe that if we had been in charge of creation we would have done it better. With a little more care about the details, we would have kept the beauty of sunsets, but eliminated germs such as staph. The more we understand the processes of the world, however, the less likely does it seem that this would be possible. The created order looks like a package deal. Exactly the same biochemical processes that enable cells to mutate . . . are those that enable cells to become cancerous and generate tumors. You can’t have one without the other.

Polkinghorne’s understanding suggests that at least the potential for disease and disability was an integral part of God’s good creation. To state the matter in other terms: If there had been no sin, there may still have been some diseases and disabilities.

One might recall that Jesus was asked, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born

blind?" (John 9:2). Jesus replied, "Neither this man or his parents sinned." Jesus moved the discussion away from the cause of the man's blindness to the opportunity that God now has to use the situation to further the divine purposes. At the same time, Jesus made it clear that sin was not the cause of this man's disability. Apparently, such disabilities are possible in the world that God created, quite apart from sin.

- > **Are you comfortable with the point of view expressed above? If not, why not?**
- > **Do you know someone who has a disability? Can you name any opportunities that have come from that disability? What have you learned because you have been close to someone with a disability?**

From another angle, God did not create a risk-free world. God created a natural order that is good, but human beings (and other creatures) are not placed in danger-free zones in order to be protected from nature's dangers. For example, God created snow, rain, hail, wind, and ice (see Job 38:22-30). These are important dimensions of God's good creation, without which life would not be possible as we know it. At the same time, creatures can be hurt in their encounter with such natural events as hailstorms or snowstorms.

- > **Again, sin may make matters worse. Can you list some examples of how human sin made human suffering caused by natural disasters worse than it would otherwise be?**

Another example: God created the law of gravity; it is a great gift, necessary for life as we know it. And we know that this law works every time! If, before sin had entered the world, Eve had fallen on the ice, it would have hurt! Such an effect may be considered more bad than good. But it was because she made a

mistake (in judging just how slippery that ice really was), not because she sinned.

Or, from another angle, one might consider the suffering of nonhuman creatures. One thinks of the suffering of animals. Consider the now-common phrase that nature is "red in tooth and claw" (Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem, *In Memoriam*).

- > **How could the suffering of animals ever be good?**
- > **If their suffering contributes to the becoming of the world that God has put into place, must that suffering always be considered bad?**
- > **How do human beings contribute to the suffering of animals in ways that are not good?**

Closing today's session

And so this session nudged you to think about and discuss the ideas that some forms of suffering are part of God's good creation and that chance and randomness are also part of God's good creation. Some of you may have found these concepts easy to accept; others of you may not accept them so easily. Great! Keep thinking and discussing!

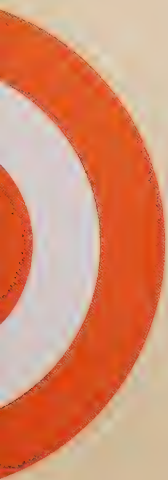
Hymn "Healing River of the Spirit"
(*Worship Boldly*, p. 105)

Prayer

Looking ahead to Session 4

We will explore suffering associated with sin: our own sin and the sins of others. Our life together is a major consideration in this session. 🌿

Terry Fretheim is the Elva B. Lovell Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. Faith is a retired staff member of Women of the ELCA.



A FOCUSING EVENT

by Wendy Reid Crisp

focusing events are "sudden, vivid" incidents that arouse interest in a problem and lead to change.

A few years ago, we went to San Francisco to spend Thanksgiving with old friends whose 25-year-old daughter, Marilda, had just been diagnosed with cancer and was scheduled for surgery.

Marilda's Hungarian-born father, Sandor, is a man who, in 1956, when he was 16, fought with rocks against Soviet tanks in the streets. Forced to flee his country as a result, he was unable to return until the fall of the Iron Curtain, long after the death of his mother. Sandy's standard line about faith in all the years we have known him has been, "Don't talk to me about religion. More people have been killed in the name of God than for any other reason."

So we weren't surprised when his wife, Giuliana, came into the den on

Thanksgiving afternoon and asked my husband, John, if he would say the blessing at dinner. We were surprised, however, a moment later when she returned and said, "Sandy wants to say the blessing. John, maybe you could carve the turkey."

As the circle of family and friends stood around the table, Sandy said, "Dear God, I'm not very good at this, but I want to say, first of all, I'm thankful I'm here, in this country, and not over there. And second, I want to ask your help on Monday when Marilda goes into the hospital. And I want to say how much all of you mean to me, to us, and so thank you. Amen."

It was what scholars call "a focusing event." As defined in the global sense by author Thomas A. Birkland (*After Disaster: Agenda Setting, Public Policy, and Focusing Events*, Georgetown

University Press, 1997), focusing on events are “sudden, vivid” incidents that arouse interest in a problem and lead to change.

On the personal level, focusing on events are those occurrences that bring us into immediate, direct, and powerful contact with the essential; everything else fades into insignificance. Suddenly, we are completely aware of what is important.

In an Old Testament passage traditionally proclaimed during Advent (Isaiah 40:1-11), God orders the prophet, “Cry out!” The prophet replies, “What shall I cry?” (v. 6) And God tells him, “Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever . . . Say, ‘Here is your God!’ See, the Lord God comes with might!”

We’ve listened to these words

for so many years that we no longer hear them. We don’t focus. The fact that our Lord comes with might to save us is almost old news; we don’t pay attention. Until . . .

More than 40 years ago, a devastating flood hit our small town two days before Christmas. Suddenly, the last-minute rush to buy and wrap presents and the family discussions about who was going to bake the pies became irrelevant as we saw homes and barns destroyed by the flood, livestock drowned, and the lives of friends and family in danger. “The grass withers, the flower fades.” And at the same time we saw people—neighbors, people from the next town, even strangers from across the state—rally around us, rushing to help us in our hour of need, rescuing stranded people from rooftops, giving blood, bring-

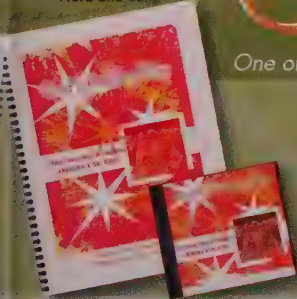
ing warm clothing and food. “The Lord God . . . will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms” (v. 11).

That Christmas, we suddenly realized what was important: the people we cared about, and the people who cared about us, including the many strangers who gave generously of their time, their possessions, and even their lives, as exemplified by the six who died assisting the evacuation. We recognized God’s hand in their hands stretched out to us; we recognized God’s word in their words of comfort. The Lord God comes with might, and the word of our God will stand forever.

Focus on this. 🌿

Wendy Reid Crisp, author of *When I Grow Up I Want to Be 60* (Perigee, 2006), serves on the council of Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Ferndale, Calif.

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Editor's note: Terri Lackey, managing editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*, joined an ELCA delegation of 15 others in India to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg's arrival in Tranquebar on the southeast coast of India. Ziegenbalg, a German Lutheran, landed at the Bay of Bengal on the Indian Ocean on July 9, 1706, to preach the gospel to Tamil Nadu Indians. The ELCA group was there July 1-9, 2006. To read more about the trip, visit the delegation's blog "Celebrating 300 Years of Lutherans in India," at <http://lutheransinindia.blogspot.com>. While in India, Lackey visited several sites and organizations where Indian Lutherans are making a difference.

BOLD LESSONS FROM India

by Terri Lackey





In the next room, young orphan girls are singing hymns in the Telugu language as I try to record what I've witnessed in India. I left the city of Chennai in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where Lutherans celebrated 300 years of Protestant missions in India, to stay with Indian friends in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

In Chennai I saw the vast work of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India; in Hyderabad I'm visiting American Baptist friends who run an orphanage that clothes, feeds, and educates about 50 girls.

In both places, I've seen Christians offering hope through the gospel to people who live on little else.

Until you've traveled in India or another developing nation, you can't imagine the squalor in which some people live. I can look out my window here and see families living under blue tarps. I can see them bathe in the open air using a bucket and a water pump. Despite the poverty, the people I spoke with in the Chennai slums, in the rural villages, and in the Hyderabad urban area offer visitors hospitality unequaled in America. In India there are people who will give you all they have, mostly genuine smiles.

If you could see with your own eyes what Lutherans in India

are doing to better the lives of women, you would want to open your checkbook to help. But the point is not to offer only handouts, but companionship. ELCA Global Mission has adopted an accompaniment model of walking hand-in-hand with our companions in other countries. No longer are we to act as the rich auntie who hands out envelopes of money on birthdays and holidays. Our relationship with companion churches is one of mutuality and interdependence. We may assist them in some areas, but they assist us too. Indians can teach us about hospitality, about giving, about sisterhood.

Here's what they taught me.

Leadership is empowerment

One Monday in July, our group visited a Slum Women's Advancement Project (SWAP) a few miles from our hotel. This project of the United Evangelical Lutheran

Church in India (UELCI) is one of six developed through the Women's Desk headquartered in Chennai. Managed by Vidhya Rani, head of the Women's Desk, this SWAP project is located in a former dump and is now a community of more than 700 families.

On our visit, we learned how the UELCI is working to empower women and children by offering them income-generating skills, improving literacy, and teaching them disease and infection control through good hygiene.

SWAP addresses issues of sanitation, human rights, violence against women, crime, and substandard housing, according to the UELCI Web site. "This is a strongly patriarchal society, a highly male society," said Rani, who explained how the UELCI's Women's Desk helps combat some of the abuses committed by men against women.

SWAP teaches women skills

like sewing, soap making, computer training, or bookbinding to help them become self-supporting and less dependent on their husbands, many of whom spend most of their income on liquor and prostitutes. The women form community self-help groups of 15 “like-minded members,” said Joseph S., SWAP field director. “The women govern themselves,” he said. “They come together, they think together, they fight together.”

Each of the self-help groups saves money and opens a checking account. This money helps members of the group get loans to start businesses or educate their children.

“That’s called empowerment,” Joseph said.

Awareness is life

India has one of the highest number of AIDS/HIV cases in the world, and women make up about 40 percent of those cases, according to Dr. Daisy Dharmaraj, director of HIV/AIDS and Community Health for the National Lutheran Health and Medical Board (NLHMB) in Chennai. NLHMB, which in 2005 received a \$5,000 endowment grant through Women of the ELCA, pro-

vides preventive, therapeutic, and rehabilitative health care to more than 1,500 families in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

“Officially, India has more than 5 million cases of AIDS; unofficially, that number is closer to 10 million,” she said. By 2025, she expects to see 50 million cases in India.

The main reason AIDS is spreading so quickly in this country is lack of awareness and the social stigma tied to the disease. Creating awareness about HIV/AIDS and providing knowledge about how to prevent it is still a concern in India. “The only way to stall further spread of the infection is to create awareness,” Dharmaraj said.

Additionally, Indians with HIV/AIDS find it difficult to receive medical treatment and care, she said. Often they are turned away from medical facilities when they are discovered to have HIV/AIDS.

Lutherans have made great strides in the states of Tamil Nadu (at Gurukul Clinic in Chennai, which offers testing, treatment, counseling, home-based care, and vocational training) and Andhra Pradesh (at Guntur, headquarters of the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran

Church, where there is a network for people with HIV/AIDS, vocational training, and home-based care; and at Rajmundhry, where there is a 200-bed hospital for people with HIV/AIDS, reproductive health care outreach, and vocational training.)

But the church could do more, Dharmaraj said. “We need to strengthen the pastoral care for HIV/AIDS patients in our churches.”

The church has not adequately addressed the conditions that allow HIV/AIDS to flourish: poverty; gender inequality; discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, caste, or sexual orientation; and human rights violations, she said.

“By healing the sick unconditionally, forgiving sins, breaking stigmas, Christ set the framework for what Christians and the church should be doing to address this issue,” she said.

Individuals make a difference

In Hyderabad, Dr. Sarada Karnatakam, an Indian Lutheran woman I met over the Internet, took me around the city to show me the work Lutheran women are doing there. Karnatakam, a professor of economics, and her two friends

MORE ABOUT LUTHERANS IN INDIA:

Missionary Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg:
<http://www.gltc.edu/tercentenary/>

SWAP: <http://uelci-india.org>

Follow the UELCI Programmes link

HIV/AIDS National Lutheran Health & Medical Board:
www.aidsindia.in or www.nlhmb.in

ELCA News stories on India: www.elca.org/news/releases.asp

Global Mission Country Packet on India:
www.elca.org/countrypackets/india/desc.html

Visit www.elca.org/globalmission and view the video explaining accompaniment.

Mani Kumari, wife of the bishop of the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC), and Ms. Blandina, the wife of a rural pastor, traveled many hours by train to meet me.

A dedicated Lutheran, Karnatakam serves as chairperson for the Society for Women and Rural Development, as chairperson for the Human Rights Desk for the UELCI, and on the executive council of the AELC.

She took me to the office of Nanda Vardhan, director and secretary of SIDUR (Society for Integrated Development in Urban & Rural Areas), "a non-profit, charitable society based on . . . empowering the oppressed to create an egalitarian society that is just and free."

Vardhan, also a Lutheran, works in the slums of the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad and in five coastal areas to make the lives of women and children more tolerable. "My organization is a secular organization, but I want people to come to the Lord. I share Jesus in action, not by preaching."

Founded in 1990, she and her husband originally started SIDUR to rehabilitate street children. "I was an English teacher in high school

and I loved it; I didn't want to leave it." But her husband needed her help running the organization. When Vardhan began helping street children, she found that women living in slum areas needed assistance too.

Some of the other work she and her staff do include: organizing and educating women to fight exploitation and helping them find a respectable place in society; offering programs that raise the living standards of the rural poor; alleviating the appalling conditions of slum dwellers; offering services and support for HIV/AIDS related programs; and providing shelter for HIV affected and infected children.

Most of the women Vardhan helps are Muslim and Hindu. Like the model in Chennai developed by the UELCI, her organization helps women begin self-help groups and learn a skill so they can earn an income for the family. The group jointly saves money and offers other members loans.

"Most of the women have to manage on what their husbands give them," she said. "The husband might earn 150 to 200 rupees [\$3 to \$4] a day. He'll spend that on cigarettes and alcohol and breakfast for his friends.

He'll spend another 5 to 10 rupees on another woman, a sex worker."

With the money that's left, the wife must feed the family, educate the children, and "manage everything." And if she doesn't make ends meet, her husband may beat her. "Wives are the property of husbands in India."

Vardhan offers slum dwellers self-reliance by teaching them money-making skills. "When the wife earns money, she can have a say in what she can do with it. After a while, the whole climate of the family changes."

Vardhan told the story about how one of the women she helped felt bold enough to sit and eat with her husband. "The woman said, 'He has a plate, and I have a plate, and we eat together.' That was a big change in her family. Usually, the man eats first, then the children. The wife gets what is left.

"My satisfaction is to bring enlightenment to some women," Vardhan said. "We teach women to act more boldly." 🌸

Terri Lackey is managing editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.





HEALTH WISE

Overcoming Alzheimer's

by Molly M. Ginty

When Patricia Negri

began to leave her daughter, she disappeared by degrees. First she fell silent in the middle of conversations. Then she ignored pleas that she bathe and wash her hair. Finally, she lost the words she needed to communicate, along with her motor functioning.

"In the end, she was no longer able to recognize me," says Kathleen Negri, a Denver, Colorado, resident who nursed her mother for six years. "But when she died, all I could do was rejoice because I knew she was finally free."

The story of the Negris, mother and daughter, illustrates the unique needs of women when it comes to Alzheimer's disease, a form of dementia that typically strikes after age 65. Alzheimer's affects 4.5 million Americans, has no cure, and has such dire emotional, physical, and financial consequences for those who have it and their loved ones that authorities have named November National Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Month.

"Women are not only at increased risk for getting Alzheimer's, but also more likely to take care of Alzheimer's patients," says Amy Niles, president of the National Women's Health Resource Center based in Red Bank, New Jersey. "Thus, women bear a double burden when it comes to this progressive, irreversible disease."

Though women are only slightly more likely to develop Alzheimer's than men, its prevalence among women is twice as high because women live longer—with a life expectancy of 80 years

compared to 75 for men. Half of all women over 85 in the United States will eventually develop this disease.

More women than men struggle with obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol—conditions that boost the risk of Alzheimer's.

Scientists believe Alzheimer's develops when brain proteins stop performing their normal function and instead cluster into two types of lesions: neurofibrillary tangles and amyloid plaques. Over time, these lesions interfere with nerve transmission, killing neurons and eroding language, learning, memory, and reason.

Though some people have a genetic predisposition for Alzheimer's, most have no family history of the disease.

Some patients undergo dramatic personality changes or become depressed or violent, but others remain emotionally stable. While some progress from simple forgetfulness to severe dementia in as little as five years, others manage to stave off dementia for a decade or more.

Early symptoms include confusion, memory loss, and judgment problems. Next come anxiety, insomnia, and wandering. Eventually, patients lose their speech, appetite, bladder, and bowel control, becoming completely dependent on their caregivers.

According to the Chicago-based Alzheimer's Association (www.alz.org), more than 70 percent of Alzheimer's patients live at home. And according to the Family Caregiver Alliance in San Francisco, the typical Alzheimer's caregiver is a 46-year-old married

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls.



woman with a part- or full-time job. "Women are the health CEOs of their households," says Niles. "We tend to take care of everyone else, even if it means putting our own needs second."

Caregivers' workloads—and the accompanying stress—can take their toll. Studies show that women who care for Alzheimer's patients are at increased risk for cardiovascular disease, anxiety, and depression.

Mary Rolsch of Lakewood, Colorado, cared for her mother for three years before she died in 2002. "I lost my temper one too many times," says Rolsch. "I felt like I was short-changing everybody: my husband, my kids, my boss, my mom, and myself."

Whether they vent their frustrations to friends or join support groups sponsored by the Alzheimer's Association, caregivers can find ways to cope.

"To nurture myself, I learned to clarify my role with my mother and stop expecting a 'thank you,'" says Negri. "I learned to limit my time with her and take time for myself. I got together with friends. I got massages. I kept a journal. And some days, I just sat down and cried."

Because the population of those over age 85 is reaching record levels in the United States, the number of people with Alzheimer's is expected to quadruple by 2050. With the disease already racking up \$100 billion in health-care costs per year, the price of this epidemic could become astronomical.

The good news is that women can ward off Alzheimer's by maintaining good health practices such as getting regular exercise, having a strong support network, eating lots of fruits, vegetables, and fish, and keeping the mind active. Taking blood-pressure medication (such

as enzyme inhibitors, beta blockers, calcium channel blockers, and diuretics) and cholesterol-lowering drugs (such as statins and fibrates) can have a protective effect. So can taking a pass on hormone replacement therapy, which can double the risk of Alzheimer's in some postmenopausal women.

Even better news: scientists are working to develop new treatments in addition to the five neurotransmitter drugs already FDA-approved. In March, researchers discovered an enzyme that may curb both forms of brain lesions that are found in Alzheimer's patients.

Health advocates hold out hope for a vaccine—and for future breakthroughs that can ease the plight of Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers. 🌿

Molly M. Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women's eNews*.



GRACE NOTES

Open Circles

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



There's a saying that coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous. I'm not sure I always agree with that, but I do believe that it's more than coincidental that circles have been on our collective minds of late.

In June a reader inquired about the origin of circles within Women of the ELCA. She wrote that some women in her congregation found circles to be exclusive, not inviting others in. Later that month, at a synodical women's organization convention, I learned that some people think that the circle is our only means of organizing.

At that same convention, and later, in another setting, I learned that some congregations have had a history of assigning every woman in the congregation to a Women of the ELCA circle. That astounded me. (By the way, not every woman who is a member of an ELCA congregation is automatically a participant in Women of the ELCA. One becomes a participant by choice and acceptance of our purpose statement, not by assignment or obligation.)

More thoughts about circles came up at the ELCA National Youth Gathering in July. In the Women of the ELCA Café (our exhibit in the interactive center), we asked attendees what would inspire them to participate in Women of the ELCA. One young woman wrote, "get rid of circles; circles=old women."

A pastor stopped by the Café to chat and told me that the women under 40 in his congregation hadn't felt welcome in the existing circles so they created their

own and shaped it in a way that works for them.

Circles are not unique to Lutherans. Some trace circles back to ancient people gathering around a fire. Circles are simply one traditional means of organizing that many Lutheran women have chosen to use. They aren't part of my Lutheran tradition, though. When a congregation uses circles often all the women in those circles (plus others, if they wish) come together maybe two or three times a year for a general meeting.

Our constitutions, as adopted and amended by triennial conventions, reflect the ways we have collectively agreed to order our lives together. The term "circles" doesn't appear once in any of our constitutions. Our constitutions do, however, offer the women of this church—young, middle-aged, old; progressive and conservative; urban and rural—great flexibility in organizing ourselves to carry out a common purpose. So, if circles work in your congregation, great! If not, so be it—do something else. Circles can also co-exist with other methods of organizing within one congregation, with all organized under the umbrella of Women of the ELCA, if they so choose.

Whatever form or method you choose, always be mindful that women in Women of the ELCA come together, in part, to support one another in our callings. To do so, we never exclude, but rather always extend hospitality and encouragement to other women. 🌿

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



From left to right are: Joanie Honigschmidt, Pat Reichardt, Wynn Byriel, Millie Reagh and Vida Burnett. Photo by Pastor Lynnae Sorensen

The women of United Dr. Martin Luther Lutheran Church in Shiner, Texas, stay active. Sure, they make health kits, school kits, and quilts for Lutheran World Relief. But they also give prayer books and quilts to all graduating high school seniors. In 2003, they began honoring those who have moved on by creating care packages. Now college students and young military recruits get packages with hot chocolate, popcorn, cookies, candy, gum, breakfast bars, and devotional guides, bookmarks, and prayers. The women prepare the packages just before Thanksgiving so the young people can get them in time for the holidays.

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AMEN!

Trusting Grace and Vision

by Catherine Malotky

If I had imagined the world as you did, God, would I have included the possibility of suffering? Why would tears or pain have been a part of the plan? Would I have made nightmares or hot flashes? Would childbirth have had to be so painful and dangerous? Would I have made the West Nile virus, or the bugs that cause meningitis, or staph, or botulism? What about tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, flood, or fire?

From my limited point of view, I wonder. Yet, without fire, the cone of the jack pine in the north woods I love would not release its seed. Without flood, the fertile renewal of the flood plain would be absent, and the productivity of its soil would slowly diminish. Without earthquake, the dynamic flow of the tectonic plates would never have produced the breathtaking mountains that renew me. Without hurricane or tornado, the atmosphere would not recycle the moisture so necessary for my garden and wetland.

How are the virulent bacteria and viruses that plague me and my earth-mates a part of your good creation, God? I do see a pattern. Mosquitoes, such a pest (and sometimes danger) to me, are feast for birds and fish. Can I trust that the same is true of other plagues?

Even my own body, God, is a miracle with challenges. The flood of hormones my body produces makes possible the conception, growth, and birth of a child. Yet those same hormones can annoy me and my sisters. Birth, which edges so poignantly close to death for mother

and child, is yet the ushering in of life. What of the baby's escape through such a small space? A physiological miracle that is sometimes complicated, yet it prompts my awe.

Of course, I can make it all worse. I can fail to care for my body. I can build a home on a flood plain. I can pollute and exploit and ravage myself, my relationships, and my world. From my limited point of view, I can miss the interrelatedness of your creation and stumble because I'm not in balance with your world.

God, you have fashioned such a wonder, in me and those I love, and in the creation all around me. When things do not go as I had hoped, I can be tempted to lose my trust in your largesse. When cancer takes one I love, can I see your redeeming hand at work? Can I trust that your creation is at heart good, and not a trap waiting to devour me? Can I live with my loss, grieve and suffer, without having to find someone, even you, God, to bear the blame? Can I allow it simply to be the way it is? And can I grow and find grace in my suffering, whether it is another I grieve for or for myself?

Strengthen me, God, to trust you and your creating hand. Surround me when I am not strong enough. Grieve with me when I suffer. Rejoice with me when I am a woman of grace and vision. Amen. 🌿

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.